

CHAPTER ONE



I'M LIVING IN this dump in Haidian Qu, close to Wudaokou, on the twenty-first floor of a decaying high-rise. The grounds are bare; the trees have died; the rubber tiles on the walkways, in their garish pink and yellow, are cracked and curling. The lights have been out in the lobby since I moved in; they never finished the interior walls in the foyers outside the elevator, and the windows are boarded up, so every time I step outside the apartment door I'm in a weird twilight world of bare cement and blue fluorescent light.

The worst thing about the foyer is that I might run into Mrs. Hua, who lives next door with her fat spoiled-brat kid. She hates that I'm crashing here, thinks I'm some slutty American who is corrupting China's morals. She's always muttering under her breath, threatening to report me to the Public Security Bureau for all kinds of made-up shit. It's not like I ever did anything to her, and it's not like I'm doing anything wrong, but the last thing I need is the PSB on my ass.

I've got enough problems.

Outside, the afternoon sun filters through a yellow haze. My leg hurts, but I should walk, I tell myself. Get some PT in. The deal I make with myself is, if it gets too bad, I'll take a Percocet;

but I only have about a dozen left, so it has to be really bad before I can take one. Today the pain is just a dull throb, like a toothache in my thigh.

I pass the gas tanks off Chengfu Road, these four-story-high giant globes, and I think: one of these days, some guy will get pissed off at his girlfriend, light a couple sticks of dynamite underneath them (since they don't have many guns here, the truly pissed-off tend to vent with explosives and rat poison), a few city blocks and a couple thousand people will get incinerated, and everyone will shrug—oh, well, too bad, but this is China, and shit happens. Department store roofs collapse; chemicals poison rivers; miners suffocate in illegal mines. I walk down this one block nearly every day on my way to work, and there are five sex businesses practically next door to each other, “teahouses” and “foot massage parlors,” with girls from the countryside sitting on pink leatherette couches, waiting for some horny migrant worker to come in with enough *renminbi* to fuck his brains out for a while and forget about the shack he's living in and the family he's left behind and the shitty wages he's earning. Hey, why not?

I still like it here, overall.

I guess.

I'm just in this bad mood lately.

So I call Lao Zhang. That's what I do these days when I'm feeling sorry for myself.

“*Wèi?*” Lao Zhang has a growly voice, like he's talking himself out of a grunt half the time.

“It's me. Yili.”

That's my Chinese name, Yili. It means “progressive ideas” or something. Mainly it sounds kind of like Ellie.

“Yili, *ni bao.*”

He sounds distracted, which isn't like him. He's probably working; he almost always is. He's been painting a lot lately. Before

that, he mostly did performance pieces, stuff like stripping naked and painting himself red on top of the Drum Tower or steering a reed boat around the Houhai lakes with a life-size statue of Chairman Mao in the prow.

But usually when I call, he sounds like he's glad to hear my voice, no matter what he's doing. Which is one of the reasons I call him when I'm having a bad day.

"Okay, I guess," I answer. "I'm not working. Thought I'd see what you were up to."

"Ah. The usual," he says.

"Want some company?"

Lao Zhang hesitates.

It's a little weird. I can't think of a time when I've called that he hasn't invited me over. Even times when I don't want to leave my apartment, when I just want to hear a friendly voice, he'll always try and talk me into coming out; and sometimes when I won't, he'll show up at my door a couple hours later with take-out and cold Yanjing beer. He's that kind of person. He works hard, but he likes hanging out too, as long as you don't mind him working part of the time. And I don't. A lot of times I'll sit on the sagging couch in his studio while he paints, listening to my iPhone, drinking beer, surfing on his computer. I like watching him paint too, the way he moves, relaxed but in control. It feels comfortable, him painting, me sitting there.

"Sure," he finally says. "Why don't you come over?"

"You sure you're not too busy?"

"No, come over. There's a performance tonight at the Warehouse. Should be fun. Call me when you're close."

Maybe I shouldn't go, I think, as I swipe my *yikatong* card at the Wudaokou light rail station. Maybe he's seeing somebody else. It's not like we're a couple. Even if it feels like we are one sometimes.

Sure, we hang out. Occasionally fuck. But he could do a lot better than me.

“Lao” means “old,” but Lao Zhang’s not really old. He’s maybe thirteen, fourteen years older than I am, around forty. They call him “Lao” Zhang to distinguish him from the other Zhang, who’s barely out of his teens and is therefore “Xiao” Zhang, also an artist at Mati Village, the northern suburb of Beijing where Lao Zhang lives.

Before I came to China, I’d hear “suburb” and think tract homes and Wal-Mart’s. Well, they have Wal-Mart’s in Beijing and housing tracts—Western-style, split-level, three bedroom, two bath houses with lawns and everything, surrounded by gates and walls. Places with names like “Orange County” and “Yosemite Falls,” plus my personal favorite, “Merlin Champagne Town.”

But Mati Village isn’t like that.

Getting to Mati Village is kind of a pain. It’s out past the 6th Ring Road, and you can’t get all the way there by subway or light rail, even with all the lines they built for the ’08 Olympics. From Haidian, I have to take the light rail and transfer to a bus.

It’s not too crazy a day. The yellow loess dust has been drowning Beijing like some sort of pneumonia in the city’s lungs, typical for spring in spite of all those trees the government’s planted in Inner Mongolia the last dozen years. The dust storms died down last night, but people still aren’t venturing out much. So I score a seat on the bench by the car door, let the train’s rhythms rattle my head. I close my eyes and listen to the recorded announcement of the stations, plus that warning to “watch your belongings and prepare well” if you are planning to exit. All around me, cell phones chime and sing, extra-loud so the people plugged into iPods can still hear them.

The *nongmin* don’t have iPods. The migrants from the countryside are easy to spot: tanned, burned faces; bulging nylon net

bags with faded stripes; patched cast-off clothes; strange, stiff shoes. But it's the look on their faces that really gives them away. They are so lost. I fit in better here than they do.

Sometimes I want to say to these kids, what are you doing here? You're going to end up living in a shantytown in a refrigerator box, and for what? So you can pick through junked computer parts for gold and copper wire? Do "foot massage" at some chicken joint? Really, you're better off staying home.

Like I'm one to talk. I didn't stay home either.

When I'm about fifteen minutes away from Mati, I try to call Lao Zhang, thinking, maybe I'll see if we can meet at the *jiaozi* place, because I haven't had anything to eat today but a leftover slice of bad Mr. Pizza for breakfast.

Instead of a dial tone, I get that stupid China Mobile jingle and the message that I'm out of minutes.

Oh, well. It's not that hard to find Lao Zhang in Mati Village.

First I stop at the *jiaozi* place. It's Lao Zhang's favorite restaurant in Mati. Mine too. The dumplings are excellent, it's cheap as hell, and I've never gotten sick after eating there.

By now it's after six p.m., and the restaurant is packed. I don't even know what it's called, this *jiaozi* place. It's pretty typical: a cement block faced with white tile. For some reason, China went through a couple of decades when just about every small public building was covered in white tile, like it's all a giant bathroom.

The restaurant is a small square room with plastic tables and chairs. There's a fly-specked Beijing Olympics poster on one wall and a little shrine against another—red paper with gold characters stuck on the wall, a gilded Buddha, some incense sticks, and a couple pieces of dusty plastic fruit on a little table. The place reeks of fried dough, boiled meat, and garlic.

Seeing how this is Mati Village, most of the customers are

artists, though you also get a few farmers and some of the local business-owners, like the couple who run the gas station. But mostly it's people like "Sloppy" Song. Sloppy is a tall woman who looks like she's constructed out of wires, with thick black hair that trails down her back in a braid with plaits the size of king snakes. Who knows why she's called "Sloppy"? Sometimes Chinese people pick the weirdest English names for themselves. I met this one guy who went by "Motor." It said something about his essential nature, he told me.

Sloppy's here tonight, sitting at a table, slurping the juice out of her dumpling and waving her Zhonghua cigarette at the woman sitting across from her. I don't know this woman. She looks a little rich for this place—sleek hair and makeup, nice clothes. Must be a collector. Sloppy does assemblage sculpture and collage pieces, and they sell pretty well, even with the economy sucking as much as it does.

"Yili, *ni hao*," Sloppy calls out, seeing me enter. "You eating here?"

"No, just looking for Lao Zhang."

"Haven't seen him. This is Lucy Wu."

"*Ni hao*, pleased to meet you," I say, trying to be polite.

Lucy Wu regards me coolly. She's one of these Prada babes—all done up in designer gear, perfectly polished.

"Likewise," she says. "You speak Chinese?"

I shrug. "A little."

This is halfway between a lie and the truth. After two years, I'm not exactly fluent, but I get around. "You speak Mandarin like some Beijing street kid," Lao Zhang told me once, maybe because I've got that Beijing accent, where you stick Rs on the end of everything like a pirate.

"Your Chinese sounds very nice," she says with that smug, phony courtesy.

She has a southern accent; her consonants are soft, slightly sibilant. Dainty, almost.

“You’re too polite.”

“Lucy speaks good English,” Sloppy informs me. “Not like me.”

“Now *you’re* too polite,” says Lucy Wu. “My English is very poor.”

I kind of doubt that.

“Are you an art collector?” I ask in English.

“Art dealer.” She smiles mischievously. “Collecting is for wealthier people than I.”

Her English is excellent.

“She has Shanghai gallery,” Sloppy adds.

“Wow, cool,” I say. “Hey, I’d better go. If you see Lao Zhang, can you tell him I’m looking for him? My phone’s dead.”

Lucy Wu sits up a little straighter, then reclines in a perfect, posed angle. “Lao Zhang? Is that Zhang Jianli?”

Sloppy nods. “Right.”

Lucy smiles at me, revealing tiny white teeth as perfect as a doll’s. “Jianli and I are old friends.”

“Really?” I say.

“Yes.” She looks me up and down, and I can feel myself blushing, because I know how I must look. “It’s been a while since we’ve seen each other. I was hoping to catch up with him while I’m here. I’ve heard wonderful things about his recent work. You know, Jianli hasn’t gotten nearly enough recognition as an artist.”

“Maybe that’s not so important to Lao Zhang,” Sloppy mutters.

Lucy giggles. “Impossible! All Chinese artists want fame. Otherwise, how can they get rich?”

She reaches into her tiny beaded bag, pulls out a lacquer card

case, and hands me a card in polite fashion, holding it out with both hands. “When you see him, perhaps you could give him this.”

“Sure.”

What a bitch, I think. Then I tell myself that’s not fair. Just because she’s tiny, pretty, and perfectly put together, it doesn’t mean she’s a bitch.

It just means I hate her on principle.

I order some takeout and head to Lao Zhang’s place.

Lao Zhang’s probably working, I figure, walking down Xingfu Lu, one of the two main streets in Mati Village. When he gets into it, he paints for hours, all day, fueled by countless espressos—he’s got his own machine. He forgets to eat sometimes, and I’m kind of proud of myself for thinking of bringing dinner, for doing something nice for him, like a normal person would do. It’s been hard for me the last few years, remembering to do stuff like that.

Maybe I’m finally getting better.

As I’m thinking this, I stumble on a pothole in the rutted road. Pain shoots up my leg.

“Fuck!”

I can barely see, it’s so dark.

There aren’t exactly streetlights in Mati Village, only electric lanterns here and there that swing in any good wind and only work about half the time, strung up on storefronts and power poles. Right now they dim and flicker. There’s problems with electricity sometimes. Not so much in central Beijing or Shanghai, but in those “little” cities you’ve never heard of, places with a few million people out in the provinces somewhere. And in villages like this, on the fringes of the grid.

But the little market on the corner of Lao Zhang’s alley is decorated with tiny Christmas lights.

I buy a couple cold bottles of Yanjing beer (my favorite) and

Wahaha water (the label features this year's perky winner of the Mongolian Cow Yogurt Happy Girl contest) and turn down the alley.

Lao Zhang lives in one of the old commune buildings, red brick, covered in some places with red wash, surrounded by a red wall. The entrance to Lao Zhang's compound has two sculptures on either side, so there's no mistaking it. One is a giant fish painted in Day-Glo colors. The other is a big empty Mao jacket. No Mao, just the jacket.

Inside the compound are four houses in a row. Sculptures and art supplies litter the narrow courtyards in between. Lao Zhang shares this place with the sculptor, a novelist who also paints, and a musician/Web designer who's mixing something now, a trance track from the sound of it, all beats and *erhu*. Not too loud. That's good. Some loud noises really get to me.

The front door is locked. Maybe Lao Zhang isn't home. Maybe he's already over at the Warehouse for the show. I use my key and go inside. I'll have a few *jiaozi*, I figure, leave the rest here, and try the Warehouse.

The house is basically a rectangle. You go in the entrance, turn, and there's the main room, with whitewashed walls and added skylights, remodeled to give Lao Zhang better light for painting.

The lights are off in the studio, but the computer's on, booted up to the login screen of this online game Lao Zhang likes to play, *The Sword of Ill Repute*. A snatch of music plays, repeats.

"Lao Zhang, *ni zai ma?*" I call out. Are you there? No answer.

To the right is the bedroom, which is mostly taken up by a *kang*, the traditional brick bed you can heat from underneath. Lao Zhang has a futon on top of his. On the left side of the house there's a tiny kitchen, a toilet, and a little utility room with a spare futon where Lao Zhang's friends frequently crash.

Which is where the Uighur is.

“Shit!” I almost drop the takeout on the kitchen floor.

Here’s this guy stumbling out of the spare room, blinking uncertainly, rubbing his eyes, which suddenly go wide with fear.

“*Ni hao*,” I say uncertainly.

He stands there, one leg twitching, like he could bolt at any moment. He’s in his forties, not Chinese, not Han Chinese anyway; his hair is brown, his eyes a light hazel, his face dark and broad with high cheeks—I’m guessing Uighur.

“*Ni hao*,” he finally says.

“I’m Yili,” I stutter, “a friend of Lao Zhang’s. Is he . . . ?”

His eyes dart around the room. “Oh, yes, I am also friend of Lao Zhang’s. Hashim.”

“Happy to meet you,” I reply automatically.

I put the food and beer down on the little table by the sink, slowly because I get the feeling this guy startles easily. I can’t decide whether I should make small talk or run.

Since I suck at both of these activities, it’s a real relief to hear the front door bang and Lao Zhang yell from the living room: “It’s me. I’m back.”

“We’re in the kitchen,” I call out.

Lao Zhang is frowning when he comes in. He’s a northerner, part Manchu, big for a Chinese guy, and right now his thick shoulders are tense like he’s expecting a fight. “I thought you were going to phone,” he says to me.

“I was—I tried—My phone ran out of minutes, so I just. . . .” I point at the table. “I brought dinner.”

“Thanks.” He gives me a quick one-armed hug, and then everything’s normal again.

Almost.

“You met Hashim?”

I nod and turn to the Uighur. “Maybe you’d like some dinner? I brought plenty.”

“Anything without pork?” Lao Zhang asks, grabbing chipped bowls from the metal locker he salvaged from the old commune factory.

“I got mutton, beef, and vegetable.”

“Thank you,” Hashim says, bobbing his head. He’s got a lot of gray hair. He starts to reach into his pocket for money.

I wave him off. “Please don’t be so polite.”

Lao Zhang dishes out food, and we all sit around the tiny kitchen table. Lao Zhang shovels *jiaozi* into his mouth in silence. The Uighur stares at his bowl. I try to make small talk.

“So, Hashim. Do you live in Beijing?”

“No, not in Beijing,” he mumbles. “Just for a visit.”

“Oh. Is this your first time here?”

“Maybe . . . third time?” He smiles weakly and falls silent.

I don’t know what to say after that.

“We’re going to have to eat fast,” Lao Zhang says. “I want to get to the Warehouse early. Okay with you?”

“Sure,” I say. I have a few *jiaozi* and some spicy tofu, and then it’s time to go.

“Make yourself at home,” Lao Zhang tells Hashim. “Anything you need, call me. TV’s in there if you want to watch.”

“Oh. Thank you, but. . .” Hashim gestures helplessly toward the utility room. “I think I’m still very tired.”

He looks tired. His hazel eyes are bloodshot, and the flesh around them is sagging and so dark it looks bruised.

“Thank you,” he says to me, bowing his head and backing toward the utility room. “Very nice to meet you.”

Chinese is a second language to him. Just like it is to me.

“S O , W H O ’ S T H E Uighur?” I finally ask Lao Zhang, as we approach the Warehouse.

“Friend of a friend.”

“He’s an artist?”

“Writer or something. Needed a place to stay.”

He’s not telling me everything, I’m pretty sure. His face is tense; we’re walking next to each other, but he feels so separate that we might as well be on different blocks.

A lot of Chinese people don’t trust Uighurs, even though they’re Chinese citizens. As for the Uighurs, a lot of them aren’t crazy about the Chinese.

You’re supposed to say “Han,” not “Chinese,” when you’re talking about the ninety percent of the population that’s, well, Chinese; but hardly anyone does.

The Uighur homeland used to be called East Turkestan. China took it over a couple hundred years ago, and now it’s “Xinjiang.” For the last thirty years or so, the Chinese government’s been encouraging Han people to “go west” and settle there.

The government takes a hard line if the Uighurs try to do anything about it.

Since the riots in Urumqi last year, things have only gotten worse. Gangs of Uighurs burned down shops and buses and went after Han Chinese with hammers and pickaxes. So much for the “Harmonious Society.”

This guy Hashim, though, I can’t picture him setting things on fire. He looks like a professor on a bender. A writer or something, like Lao Zhang said. Maybe he’s an activist, some intellectual who got in trouble. It doesn’t take much for a Uighur to get into trouble in China.

“You should be careful,” I say.

Lao Zhang grins and squeezes my arm. “I know—those Uighurs, they’re all terrorists.”

“Ha ha.”

The other thing that’s screwed the Uighurs is that they’re Muslims, and you know how that goes in a lot of people’s heads.

THE WAREHOUSE IS at the east end of Mati Village, close to the *jiaozi* place. It's called that because it used to be a warehouse. The building is partitioned into several galleries and one big space, with a café in the corner. The main room has paintings, some sculpture, and, tonight, a band put together by Lao Zhang's courtyard neighbor. The highlight of the evening is the end of a performance piece where this guy has been sealed up in what looks like a concrete block for forty-eight hours. Tonight's the night he's scheduled to break out, and a couple hundred people have gathered to watch.

"I don't get it."

"Well, you could say it's about self-imprisonment and breaking free from that," Lao Zhang explains. "Or breaking free from irrational authority of any kind."

"I guess."

"Hey, Lao Zhang, *ni zenmeyang?*?" someone asks.

"*Hao, hao*. Painting a lot. You?"

Everyone here seems to know Lao Zhang, which isn't surprising. He's been in the Beijing art scene since it started, when he was a teenager and hung out at the Old Summer Palace, the first artists' village in Communist China. After a couple of years, the cops came in and arrested a lot of the artists, and the village got razed. That happened to a lot of the places where Lao Zhang used to hang out. "Government doesn't like it when too many people get together," he told me once.

Finally, Lao Zhang gave up on Beijing proper. "*Tai dade mafan*," he'd say. Too much hassle. Too expensive. So he led an exodus to Mati Village, a collective farm that had been practically abandoned after the communes broke up. A place where artists who hadn't made it big could live for cheap.

"You think they'll bust you here?" I asked once.

Lao Zhang shrugged. "Who knows? It lasts as long as it lasts."

I have to wonder. Because even though Mati Village is pretty far away from Beijing proper, far from the villas and townhouses on Beijing's outer fringes, people still find their way here. Foreigners, art-lovers, journalists.

Me.

And that Prada chick from the *jiaozhi* place tonight. Lucy Wu.

"Jianli, it's been a long time." Lucy Wu smiles and extends her hand coyly in Lao Zhang's general direction, having spotted us hanging out by the café, behind the PA speakers where it's not quite so loud.

"Luxi," Lao Zhang replies. He takes her hand for a moment; it's dwarfed in his. He stares at her with a look that I can't quite figure out. "You're well?"

"Very." She takes a step back, like she's measuring him up. "I met your friend Yili earlier this evening. Did she tell you?"

"Sorry," I say. "I forgot."

Lucy giggles. "Not to worry. I knew we'd find each other."

I watch them watching each other, like a couple of circling cats.

"I'm going to get a beer," I say.

Back in the main room, muffled thuds come from inside the "concrete" block (I'm pretty sure it's plaster). Cracks appear, then a little chunk falls out, then more pieces, and all of a sudden there's a hole, and you can see this skinny, shirtless man covered in sweat, swinging a sledgehammer against the walls of his prison. The room is flooded with a rank smell, which makes sense, considering the guy's been in the box for a couple of days.

Everybody cheers.

I drink my beer. Grab another. The crowd starts to thin out around me. Show's over, I guess. It's been almost an hour since I've seen Lao Zhang.

I think about looking for him, but something holds me back. Someone, more accurately.

She's got to be an old girlfriend. Except I couldn't tell if he was really happy to see her.

"Sorry."

It's Lao Zhang, who has appeared next to me, without Lucy Wu.

"How was it?" he asks.

"Okay."

He rests his hand on my shoulder. But it's not a friendly gesture. I can feel the tension in his hand.

I look behind him and see Lucy Wu, standing over by the entrance to the video gallery, too far away for me to make out her expression, except I can tell she's watching us.

"Let's go," he says.

We go outside. I start to turn down Heping Street in the direction of Xingfu Road, toward Lao Zhang's house.

"Wait."

I turn to look at him. The frown from earlier tonight is back. "It's better if you don't come over tonight," he says.

I shrug. "Fine."

I should've figured. No way I can compete with a Lucy Wu.

"Here." He digs through his pockets and pulls out some cash. "Some money. For a taxi."

I don't take it. "Why didn't you just tell me not to come?"

"I didn't think. . . ." He grimaces, shakes his head. "I should have. I'm sorry."

I don't know what to say. I zip up my jacket and wonder where I'm going to find a taxi this time of night in Mati Village. Down by the bus station, I guess.

"Yili. . . ." Lao Zhang reaches out his hand, rests it gently but urgently on my arm. "Don't go home tonight. It's better you go someplace else. Visit some friends or something. Just for tonight."

That's when everything shifts. I'm not mad any more.

"What's going on?"

"It's complicated."

"Are you in trouble?"

He hesitates. "You know how things are here," he says. "Anyway, it's not the first time."

"Can I help?"

I don't know why I say it. I'm not even sure that I mean it.

I still can't see his face very well in the dark, but I think I see him smile.

"Maybe later. If you want."

CHAPTER TWO



THERE AREN'T A lot of places I can think of to go in Beijing at one in the morning.

I tell the taxi driver to take me to Says Hu.

It's eleven thirty now, and it'll be dead by the time I get there in an hour and a half; I figure I can hang out, while British John closes up, and decide what to do next.

I forgot it was Karaoke Night.

People come out of the woodwork for this: expats from the Zhongguancun Electronics District, students and teachers from the Haidian universities, ready to get loaded and give us their best rendition of "You Light Up My Life" or "Hotel California."

When I walk through the door, the place is packed, and a rangy Chinese girl with dyed blonde hair is singing "My Heart Will Go On."

I almost turn around and leave, but British John has already spotted me. He tops off a pitcher of Qingdao and comes out from behind the bar, beer belly leading his narrow shoulders, face permanently red from too much sun and alcohol.

"Ellie! Good, you're here. Rose didn't show up. Boyfriend crisis. Stupid bint."

"I'm not here to work."

“When are you ever?”

“Fuck you,” I mutter. Maybe I’m late sometimes, but I do a good job for British John.

Some days it’s hard to leave the apartment, that’s all.

I pick up a rag and start wiping down tables.

Says Hu is an expat bar on the second floor of a corner mall next to an apartment complex, above a mobile phone store. It’s dark, furnished in cheap plastic-coated wood, with dartboards, British soccer posters, and jerseys on the walls. Old beer funk mixes with that bizarre cleaner they use here in China, the one that smells like acrid, perfumed kerosene.

I work here a few shifts a week. That’s plenty.

I don’t mean British John’s a bad guy. He’s not. He’s hinted about hiring me to run this place so he can start another business, making me legal and getting me a work visa, which god knows I need.

But doing this?

“And my heart will go on and on!”

I duck behind the bar, pour myself a beer, and swallow a Percocet.

Between pouring drafts and mixing drinks, I think about what happened in Mati Village.

Lao Zhang has to be in some kind of trouble, but what? The central government doesn’t care much about what anybody does, as long as they don’t challenge the government’s authority. Lao Zhang’s not political, so far as I know. He doesn’t talk about overthrowing the CCP or democracy or freedom of speech. Nothing like that. He talks about living a creative life, about building communities to support that, places that encourage each individual’s expression and value their labors—the opposite of the factories and malls and McJobs that treat people like trash and throw them away whenever they feel like it.

Maybe that’s close enough to freedom of speech to get him in trouble.

But why am *I* in trouble?

You're a foreigner, you cause problems, usually they just kick you out of China. Which, if I don't get my act together, is going to happen anyway.

He told me not to go home tonight.

Maybe it's not the government, I think. Maybe it's gangsters. Or some local official Lao Zhang pissed off. A back-door deal gone wrong.

And then there's Lucy Wu. Ex-girlfriend? Undercover Public Security Officer?

He should have told me what was going on.

My leg hurts like a motherfucker, even with the Percocet, so I start drinking Guinness, and I end up hanging out in the bar after we close, drinking more Guinness with British John, his Chinese wife Xiaowei, an Australian named Hank, and two Norwegian girls. One of them, the taller of the two who looks like a supermodel, is a bitch. She keeps going on about the evils of American imperialism. "It was American imperial aggression that created the desire for a Caliphate," and "The Taliban was a predictable response to American imperial aggression."

British John keeps giving me looks, like he thinks I'm going to lose it.

"Hey, we need more music," Xiaowei pipes up. "What should I play?"

"You choose, luv," says British John. "As long as it's none of that fucking awful Korean pop."

Xiaowei pouts. She loves Korean pop, which as British John points out, really is fucking awful.

"Reggae!" shouts Hank the Australian.

"It was America's criminal invasion of Iraq," the Norwegian chick drones on. She's kind of drunk by now, too. "Everyone involved is a criminal. You know, Falluja, Haditha, Abu Ghraib, these are war crimes. . . ."

Hank and the other Norwegian girl, meanwhile, have gone over to the jukebox, draped over each other like partners in a three-legged race. “Redemption Song” booms over the speakers.

“These soldiers, they killed innocents, and you Americans call them heroes.”

“Why don’t you just shut the fuck up?” I finally say. I’m not mad. I’m just tired. “You Norwegians are sitting on top of all that North Sea oil or you’d be making deals and screwing people like everyone else. Plus, you kill whales.”

Supermodel straightens up. Actually, she looks more like a Viking. All she needs is a spear. “Norway contributes more percentage of its income to foreign aid than any other country. While you Americans—”

“Oh, it’s wrong to kill whales,” Xiaowei says, her eyes filling with tears. “And dolphins. They are so smart! I think they are smarter than we are.”

“Darts, anyone?” British John asks.

I END UP crashing at British John and Xiaowei’s place, finally dragging myself off their couch the next day around noon to make my way home.

Of course, I run into Mrs. Hua, who is hustling her kid into their apartment, him clutching an overstuffed, greasy bag of Mickey D’s.

“Somebody looking for you,” she hisses, her little raisin eyes glittering in triumph. “You in some kind of trouble!”

I roll my eyes. “Yeah, right.”

“Foreigners,” she continues. “In suits! You in trouble.”

I freeze, but only for a moment.

“Whatever.”

I unlock the door and make my way through the living room, which is cluttered with all kinds of random stuff: books, magazines,

dirty clothes, a guitar amp, and a cardboard standup figure of Yao Ming draped with a plastic lei. My roommate Chuckie has the blackout curtains drawn, and I can hardly see a thing, just Yao Ming, the red of his jersey blanched gray by the dark.

Foreigners in suits. It doesn't make sense. How can Lao Zhang be in trouble with foreigners in suits?

Then I think: maybe it's not Lao Zhang they're looking for.

I'm not in trouble, I tell myself. I'm not. All that shit happened a long time ago, and nobody cares about it any more.

"Cao dan! Zhen ta ma de!"

"Chuckie? What?"

Chuckie bursts out of his bedroom, greasy hair bristling up in spikes, glasses askew, Bill Gates T-shirt about three sizes too big, knobby knees sticking out beneath dirty gym shorts.

"That fucking bastard stole my seventh-level Qi sword!"

"I'm sorry to hear it," I say. "Who stole your sword?"

"Ming Lu, the little shits! I should go bust his damn balls!"

I try to picture Chuckie busting much of anything and fail. The reason I have such a good deal renting this apartment is that Chuckie gives me a break in exchange for tutoring him in English conversation. Sometimes I listen to him and think that I'm not really doing my job.

"So . . . Chuckie . . . I don't understand. This sword, I mean, it's not a real sword, is it? It's like . . . it's part of the game, right?"

Chuckie stares at me like I've suddenly grown horns.

"Of *course* it's part of the game!"

"So, um . . . if it's not real, how did Ming Lu steal it?"

Chuckie paces around the dim, dank apartment, which I notice smells like some weird combination of sour beer and cement dust. "I lend it to him," he mutters. "I *trust* him!" He slaps the cardboard Yao Ming for emphasis. "And that turtle's egg, *jiba* son of a slave girl go and *sell* it!"

I had a lot to drink last night and I'm pretty sleep-deprived, so maybe if I had some coffee I could follow him a little better. Still, he's talking about a virtual sword in an online game. How can I take it seriously?

Chuckie's game is *The Sword of Ill Repute*, the same game Lao Zhang plays. That's how I met Lao Zhang, actually, through Chuckie. Lao Zhang was throwing a party at this space off the 4th Ring Road, and he'd invited his online friends to attend. Chuckie hadn't really wanted to go. He didn't approve of Lao Zhang's gaming style. "Too peaceful!" he complained. "He don't like to go on quest, just sit in teahouse and wine shop and drink and chat all the time."

Me, I was tired of virtual reality and thought an actual party might be fun. I'd thought maybe I was going crazy, sitting in that apartment all the time. I was having a lot of nightmares, not sleeping well, and I needed to get out.

So we went to the party, which was at this place called the Airplane Factory (because it used to be an airplane factory). When we got there, a couple of the artists were doing a piece, throwing dyed red mud at each other and chanting slogans every time they got hit. A DJ was spinning tunes while another artist projected images on the blank white wall: chickens being decapitated and buildings falling down and Mickey Mouse cartoons. At some point, this fairly lame Beijing punk band played, though I had to give them points for attitude.

I wandered around on my own, not talking to anybody, because even though I'd wanted to come, once I got there I felt awkward and nervous, like I couldn't have been more out of place. Eventually I saw Chuckie standing over by this installation piece, a ping-pong table that lit up and made different noises depending on where the ball hit. That's where the beer was, iced for once, in plastic tubs.

Chuckie was talking to this big, stocky guy with a goatee and thick eyebrows, wearing paint-splattered cargo shorts, an ancient Cui Jian T-shirt, and a knit beanie. The guy had just opened a bottle of Yanjing, and instead of drinking from it, he gave it to me, eyebrow half-cocked, grinning. There was something about his smile I liked, something about how it included me, like we were already sharing a joke. “You’re Chuckie’s roommate,” he said. “Chuckie says you’re crazy.”

That was Lao Zhang.

Now I’m thinking: talk about a pot/kettle scenario, ’cause here’s Chuckie, pacing around the living room, muttering about how some *jiba* ex-friend of his has ripped off his virtual sword.

Chuckie grabs his backpack and heads for the door.

“Hey. Where are you going?”

“Matrix,” Chuckie mumbles.

“Why?”

“Because that’s where Ming Lu is.”

“So, what are you going to do?”

“Make him pay.”

“Hey, Chuckie, wait a minute. Just . . . wait.”

He pauses at the door. “What?”

“You’re not going to do anything stupid, are you?”

Chuckie swings his backpack over his shoulder. “That Qi sword is worth 10,000 *kuai*! I’m going to make him pay me for it!”

“You’re kidding.”

Ten thousand yuan is no small sum of money. It’s over fourteen hundred dollars. More money than I make in a month. More money than Chuckie makes a month doing his freelance geek gigs, I’m pretty sure. He’s a genius with computers, but he’s always getting canned for spending too much time online doing things he shouldn’t.

“I don’t kid about this!” Chuckie yells, wild-eyed. “I’m going!”

“Hey, Chuckie, wait a minute. *Deng yihuir*,” I repeat in Chinese for emphasis. “Was there anybody looking for me this morning? Some foreigners? In suits?”

Chuckie pauses by the door and frowns. “Oh. Some guys came by a couple hours ago. I said you weren’t around.”

“What did they want?”

“They didn’t say.” He shrugs his backpack onto his other shoulder and opens the door.

“Wait a minute,” I say again. “What *kind* of guys?”

“I don’t know,” Chuckie replies, clearly frustrated. “Foreigners in suits, like you said.” And he starts to leave.

“Wait, I’ll come with you.”

I throw on some fresh clothes, replenish my backpack with clean underwear, which I always do in case I end up crashing somewhere else, which, objectively, happens kind of a lot. Then I grab my passport and retrieve the roll of cash that I’ve hidden in a balled-up T-shirt tossed in the corner of my tiny closet.

When I come out of my room, Chuckie is pacing in a little circle by the door, looking like he’s ready to bolt.

So am I. I don’t want to stay in this apartment. Not for another minute.

Matrix is a couple miles away, so we hop on a bus that’s so packed, I hardly move when it jerks and squeals and halts—it’s like I’m surrounded by human airbags.

Our destination is a couple of blocks from the bus stop, just east of Beida, short for Beijing University. Chuckie’s pissed off and walking so fast that I can barely keep up.

“He’ll be there,” Chuckie mutters, “that little penis shit. He’s always there right now.”

“You don’t say ‘penis.’”

Chuckie looks confused. “Penis means *jiba*, right?”

“Yeah, but you should say, like, ‘fucking,’ or ‘dickhead.’ It sounds better.”

We pass the new Tech center covered with LED billboards and the latest weird-shaped mirror glass high-rise that resembles some gargantuan star cruiser squatting on a landing pad; practically everything they've built in Beijing the last ten years looks like part of a set in the latest big-budget science fiction movie.

Matrix Game Parlor takes up most of the ground floor of a six-story white-tile storefront that's probably slated for demolition in the near future, since it must have been built way back in the eighties. It's a maze of navy blue walls, computer terminals, and arcade games, and though most of the serious gamers are wearing headsets, a lot of the casual players aren't, so there's this cacophony of cartoon explosions and thumping bass lines and corny synthesized orchestras. Plus everybody's cells are going off all the time with these loud polyphonic ringtones, and nobody talks quietly into their cells; they yell, like they don't trust that the person on the other end will hear them otherwise, and I'm already thinking I want out of here. And even though they've passed laws in China against smoking in public places, *everyone* smokes in this place, so I'm following Chuckie through the maze and this blue smoke haze that's lit up by neon screens and intermittent strobe lights, and I'm starting to cough. I always have a little bronchitis from the pollution here, and I just can't handle the smoke any more.

I used to smoke. Everyone around me did back then. That's what we'd do, me and my buddies, we'd smoke cigarettes and crack jokes to keep each other loose, just laugh at shit, you know? You had to laugh at all the shit sometimes.

Embrace the Suck, we used to say.

"There he is!" Chuckie hisses.

I recognize Ming Lu. He's this short, fat guy shaped more or less like a dumpling with limbs and a head. Right now he's sitting in front of a terminal littered with junk food, using a fancy joystick, probably his own, to manipulate his avatar. I figure he's

probably either killing or fucking someone, from the exultant expression on his face.

Chuckie grabs Ming Lu's T-shirt by the collar and slaps him upside the head.

Ming Lu whirls around blindly, glasses askew, scattering his shrimp chips.

"What—? Who—?"

"You mother fucking dog's bastard!" Chuckie screams.

As I start to form a mental picture of that scenario, I lose track of the argument entirely. For one thing, the two of them are talking way too fast for me to follow, and Ming Lu has this Sichuan accent that gets pretty thick when he's excited and being slapped around by somebody. For another, I glance over my shoulder and see, dimly through the smoke haze, two guys heading in our direction. Foreign guys in suits.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Ming Lu is babbling, "but I *had* to!"

I don't think. I run.

I duck down an aisle, bumping into a couple of giggling teen girls with Go Gaiyuko backpacks. I turn a corner, slipping and sliding past a cluster of Dance Dance Revolution games, and I don't even know why I'm running; I just don't want to get caught.

Up ahead there's a little hall where the bathrooms are. At the end of that, what looks like an exit. I run as fast as I can, praying under my breath that this isn't one of those places where the emergency exits are locked so we would all die horribly if there were a fire, and hit the release bar on the door.

I'm blinded by daylight. I blink a few times. I'm in a little courtyard that serves mostly as a trash dump and a place to park bicycles and mopeds off the street. A few sad trees in crumbling concrete planters. An old-style six-story apartment building across the way. Laundry hangs from the cramped balconies;

random wires crisscross limply from roof to roof. It's oddly silent, except for a couple of chattering sparrows.

Then I hear a burst of dialog and music from one of the apartments; a guy bellowing about revenge against the Emperor, some cheesy historical soap on TV. "I'll drink to his death!" echoes in the courtyard.

That unfreezes me. I plunge into the apartment building, down the narrow corridor that leads past the stairwell, and out the other side.

I'm on a little street with no real sidewalks, a few small cars shoved up against the buildings amidst a tangle of bikes. An old man sits on a tiny folding stool by the nonexistent curb, mending a pair of pants, a few odds and ends for sale spread out on a blanket next to him: a fake Cultural Revolution clock, a couple DVDs, a blender. "You want?" he says to me, holding up the clock, winding it up to show me how the Red Guard waves her Little Red Book to count off the seconds. "You want buy?"

"*Buyao*," I say. I don't want. I run down the street.

I don't run that well because of my leg, but for once I'm hardly feeling it. I keep running. I pass more high-rises, Tsinghua University's new science center, billboards, animated LED ads: giant stomachs, pills, and cars. Here's the Xijiao Hotel. Okay. I know this place. I'm breathing hard and sweating. Now my leg really hurts, and my shoulders feel bruised from my bouncing backpack, which I should've cinched up, but I've gotten out of the habit. I slow down, wipe my forehead. I don't see any foreigners in suits.

I'm by this little street leading into the Beijing Language & Culture University campus from the Xijiao Bilingual that has small shops, restaurants, and stalls that live off business from students—places where you can buy cheap electronics, pirated DVDs, school supplies, tours to Tibet. And phone cards.

I stop and buy a hundred-yuan card for my phone, dial the number, scratch off the silver, and punch in the voucher code. I've got a string of messages waiting for me.

I'm still feeling exposed out here on the street. I decide to go onto the BLCU campus. I'm almost young enough to be a student. Besides, I dress like one: I'm wearing high-top sneakers, a long-sleeved snowboarding T-shirt decorated with flowers and snowflakes, and jeans, and I'm carrying a backpack. I blend in here, unlike foreigners in suits. I could be just another foreign student trying to better myself by learning Chinese. That's what I was doing, not so long ago.

I head over to the Sauce, a coffeehouse that's been on campus forever. It's not bad. I stand in line behind a skinny white boy chatting up a cute Chinese girl, order myself a regular cup of coffee, and take a seat by the window. I stare down at the street, at the egg-shaped orange phone booths, at the newly green trees, and I check my messages.

British John, asking me if I can cover Rose's shift for Karaoke Night. A bunch of text-message spam in Chinese, which I can't read. Delete, delete, delete.

Then a message from Lao Zhang. "*Yili, ni hao.* I'm leaving Beijing for a few days. . . ." A pause. "I wanted to let you know." Another pause. "Anyway, see you later. *Man zou.*"

Go slowly. Be careful.

I start to delete the message, but my finger hovers over the key for a moment, and then I hit save instead.

Next message.

"Hey, babe. It's me."

My heart starts to thud, and the bottom falls out of my gut.

"Listen, I need to see you," he continues. "Right away. It's important. Call me as soon as you get this. Okay?"

I stare at the phone. Fucking Trey. Why does he do this to me?